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MORTAL EYES

by Ann Chatham

It would not let her rest. She walked the silent halls, half-dreaming in the darkness, until she could barely force one step to follow another; then she would lie down and sleep fitfully while it beat against the walls of her belly as if demanding that she move again.

The days dragged on more or less as they always had, though in some moments she would find herself blinking over a task, her hands resting on a newly folded bed linen half-placed in the closet and no notion of how long she'd stood unmoving, save that what felt like a small fist had begun to beat against her lowest rib. The other women watched her when they thought she wasn't looking, but so long as she still could walk between the closets and the laundry and wield a needle, no one would send her away and bear the extra work instead. If she did not complain, they would not ask, in so many words; it did not occur to her that they might watch out of sympathy, or wish to help. So the days were long, but it was the nights that were difficult: silent and interminable, lit only by intermittent moonlight from unshuttered windows.

She was the only one awake when the Hunt came. She heard the noise of them outside in the court over the slow tread of the night: the sound of hooves that did not beat with quite the gait of horses, the horns that were neither pipes nor trumpets, and other sounds that even her too-tired mind shied away from trying to identify.

There was a window at the end of the corridor she paced, and when she unlatched the shutter to lean out, the stone below was covered over in roiling shadows. She thought perhaps that she should have been afraid, and wondered briefly why no one else seemed to have waked to the tumult, but mostly her mind was taken up distinguishing strange figures in fine clothing, and the glint of a gem here, or a pair of bone-white horns that might have been part of hat or head. For once the child stayed as still as she did, perhaps feeling the catch to her breath or the swifter beating of her heart.

One of them looked up then, scanning the building, and met her eyes as she looked down. Even through the darkness and the swirling wisps of sleeplessness everpresent at the edges of her vision she saw the face clearly: narrow and oval, with wide human eyes surrounded by features that weren't human at all. It raised a hand with too many fingers to point at her, and other faces (all different, all as strange) turned up towards

her window. The air grew quieter, and much of the movement below her stilled for as long as it took her to blink twice, slowly.

“By what power are you awake?”

She shook her head at the question, gazing down at the antlered brow and pointed teeth of the one who had asked it. Belatedly, an answer made its way as far as her mouth. “I do not sleep.”

“All mortals sleep.” Bright sparks writhed their way across her vision like burning moths and she fell forward towards the windowsill. The child kicked ungently, and she caught herself before falling onto her occupied belly or pitching out the window; she’d not had fainting spells so badly before this. A change in the faces below her made her suspect suddenly that this had not been her own doing, either.

“All mortals sleep,” the antlered creature repeated, but this time she clenched her fingers on the window frame, and nothing happened.

“I shall sleep when the unborn wills it,” she said, her irritation weakening the fog in which her thoughts kept themselves. “What right or purpose have you to be in this place?”

“We have come to collect a debt owed.”

“What debt do you collect in the midnight hours from a sleeping household?” She would have wondered if she were

dreaming awake but for the cold of the night air and the child's stillness.

"We are owed a life. A century ago, we granted one of this house a life, but now we find a use for it again."

She blinked down at the faces that came and went in the darkness as their owners looked up or away from her. "No one in this house was alive a century ago. You are too late to reclaim that."

"We care not whether it be the same life; the debt of the father may be paid by a son or a grandson." The things that were not horses shifted, restless beneath their riders, and stamped against the cobbles; she heard a scraping noise more like claws than hooves, and shuddered.

"No," she said, and the word echoed across the court, louder than she'd thought she spoke. "You may not kill any of this house." She had no notion of how she could prevent their doing anything, but she was the only one still awake to try. Somewhere in the house behind her, the lord's heir slept clutching the wooden horse his father had given him before he had taken all their menfolk away to the wars.

The antlered creature made a sound that might have been laughter. "It is a life we want; a death is of no use to us."

She blinked down at them and gripped the windowsill, her thoughts turning dizzily in no helpful direction. A different

voice called, “Come down to us!” and while the child might keep her from their sleep, it could not stop her feet from carrying her through the dark hall to the back stairs. She went out through the kitchens, snatching up a little knife as she passed and an old cassock that someone had left by the door. There was just room to slip the knife into the cuff of her sleeve, the iron blade cold with nothing but her shift between it and skin. Then she could no longer delay her hands from lifting the bar across the door, and she stepped out among the Hunt, swallowing a whimper as the shadows swirled around her like curious hounds.

The cassock was buttoned for sleeves, but it was still large enough to fit around her body, and she had just time to struggle into it before one of the riders plucked her up with a hand large enough to lift her beneath both arms at once and settled her before one of the others, on a steed that looked nearly horse-like save for its long neck and a striped coat that felt like goosedown beneath her scrabbling fingers. She clutched at the beast’s feathery mane, and the rider behind her wrapped a smooth-scaled arm firmly around her between breast and belly.

She shut her eyes as the Hunt began to move, so she did not see whether they went through the gate or over it, but the scrape and clatter of steps on stone was replaced by the rush of

wind beating against her face with the strength of an approaching storm. After a time when she did not fall off, and the wind did not slacken, curiosity overcame terror and she opened her eyes a little bit against the wind.

The Hunt rode in a river of darkness under bright stars. For a confused moment, she thought the stars continued below them as if they rode through the heavens with no further reference to the earth at all, but then a tree branch flashed before one of the lights below her view, and she realized that these were earthly fires she saw. Or less than earthly, perhaps, for this was no festival night to be lit with bonfires, yet there they burned on the ground, and far below her besides. Her fingers tightened in the mount's feathered fur until she wondered if she would be able to pry them loose should she ever come near the earth again.

The rider who held her, feeling her shudder, spoke calmly near her ear. "We ride over the edge of the mortal lands now; it is not much farther that we travel." She tried to turn her head to look at the speaker but got only a face full of her own wind-driven hair. By the time she had done shaking her head violently and spit out most of the strands in her mouth and the child had kicked her a time or two for good measure, the Hunt had come down past the branches again and rode through a wood.

The trees were not made with metal limbs and jeweled branches like the stories, but nonetheless she could tell that they were other than mortal when she dared unclench one hand to push the hair from her eyes. Ahead of them, the Hunt slowed, pouring into an area of fresh coppice and fanning out around a huge standard that might have been left uncut for centuries. She blinked at the tree, wondering what woodcraft they used here that timber of such size could be cut or managed. The antlered one who had spoken to her in the court drew rein by the tree's trunk, made tiny by its size, and the rider who carried her drew up beside him and pointed a slim scaled arm at the darkness by the tree's base. A ring of wispy silver lights flared around the tree like candles held by invisible hands.

The sting of the cold wind had left her almost numb, but a little warmth began to prick back into her face as she stared at the thing by the tree's root. It was bound to the tree, she realized after blinking past the first shock of the face, like a stillborn changeling child, all wide forehead and pinched toothless features beneath. The too-low eyes were closed, and the body, wrapped in cords and covered over with last season's leaves, was still as death.

“Why do you bring me here?” she asked, when none of the host spoke, and she glanced up to see them watching her, still as statues themselves.

The antlered one spoke again, and she caught the points of bright teeth flashing in the dim light. “Our queen has lain here too long unwaking, and none of us can rouse her sleep. The cast of bones has said that mortal eyes may see what we cannot and free her from this enchantment.”

She looked from him to the bound thing by the tree, and pieces tumbled slowly together in her mind: they could not see the ropes that had bound the thing before them so long that the tree had begun to grow over the bindings. She wondered what they did see, and hoped this was not some changeling set in place of what they looked to wake.

“We will reward you well, if you succeed,” another voice told her from somewhere among the gathered Hunt, though she thought perhaps there was a growl below the words of menace, for what they might do to her if she did not. The only reward she could think to want was to be home, unsurrounded by these creatures, in the sleeping house.

The slim arms of the scaled creature helped her down, and she saw that its narrow torso and wide hips were topped with a woman’s face under a crest of feathers as soft as its steed’s. It

was no stranger than the rest of the Hunt. She turned back to the thing bound to the tree.

Kneeling, she followed ropes of twisted linen with her fingers, dislodging leaves, but found no knots to untie. If there had once been knots, they had been swallowed up by the tree's growth, and she wondered how long the bindings had been here, and how long the Hunt had expected their queen to sleep.

Tearing at the cloth had no effect but to catch at her fingernails and scrape her fingers raw. The little shears she used for the mending might have cut through, but they were tucked neatly into the mending basket, unreachable. That left the knife, which she had hoped to keep hidden against her need, not that she was certain even iron would do her any good against voices that could command no matter whether she wished to follow. She drew it out as carefully as her trembling hands allowed her, trying not to prick herself or her clothing.

The blade was too long to hide in her hand, so she didn't try, just pulled it loose and pressed it to the bindings, trying not to hear whatever reaction those surrounding her might have. The metal slid through the linen as if it were no more than a single thread rather than great twisted ropes that should have needed sawing at, and the knife carried through on the first cut and burnt a line in the trapped thing's skin. She jerked her hand back and watched, heart thudding, as the wound

smoldered like a badly snuffed candle, but the too-strange eyes did not open. The child kicked her sharply, but none of the watching Hunt came forward to pull her away.

She lowered the knife again, this time cutting carefully as if she were ripping out a seam in fine cloth. Ropes parted. She brushed away the cut ends from neck to ankle and rocked back on her heels. The thing did not move with either the flutter of eyelids or the rise of breath, but the tree behind it, huge as it was, began to tremble.

She looked up just as the ground rocked beneath her, tumbling her backwards. Now there was a commotion around her from the Hunt, but whatever they shouted washed over her ears as she stared up at the tree with its branches tossing madly in no wind she could feel. Something knocked the knife from her hand, and she scrambled away as best she could, treading on her skirt and tripping herself as a root the size of her thigh pulled itself out of the ground. A smaller tendril wrapped itself around the knife, and she could smell the wood scorch as it lifted the steel and moved shakily to plunge the blade into the head of the creature she had just cut free.

The skull made a hollow snapping noise as blade and then branch punched through it. The child and her heart beat uneven rhythms in her chest and the wisp-lights flickered madly as the thing that had been bound broke open like a dried

gourd, under root and steel. A mass of tiny things spilled out between the pieces of its shell and melted into the heaving dirt. She could not tell whether they wriggled on their own or if that were nothing but an illusion of the wavering light, but she scooted another awkward distance backwards until she fetched up against something firm. She looked up to see the feathered steed that had brought her here. It stood steady, its three-hooved feet planted firmly on the shaking ground, and bent its head to whiffle at her hair the way a real horse might. She tried to ignore the carrion scent of its breath; it did not seem like to eat or step on her at present, which seemed as near to safety as the moment had to offer.

The tree had reordered itself while she looked away, and now there was no sign of the bound thing or the whipping roots but a softness to the ground. Instead, the side of the trunk had split open like a burst seam. At first her eyes tried to tell her that the thing that stepped out of it was another rider of the Hunt, but the wisp-lights swam around it as it left the tree, and she saw that the tall deer body joined smoothly to the slim torso that rose above it. As strange as the faces of the Hunt had been, this one was indescribable under the wide antlers amidst a cloud of what might have been hair or perhaps a great tangle of leaf and vine. She could not tell.

“I will repay you, mortal woman,” she understood it to say, though she did not think those were the words spoken.

She ran her tongue over dry lips, feeling the horse at her back that was not a horse. “How?”

“Eyes for eyes, and sight for sight, mortal woman. It is a fair weight of payment.” The creature—she supposed it must be the Hunt’s Queen, though it seemed no more female to her than the tree it had come out of—gestured with a hand that unfolded sideways like the bones of a bird’s wing, and one after another the circle of floating lights followed the motion, bobbing towards her like twigs tossed in a stream’s current.

She would have flinched back, had there been space to do so. “I ask only to return home,” she said, and added quickly, “Unharméd. Unchanged. That is repayment enough.”

The sparks danced around her like the swirling clouds sent up by a log added to a fire, throwing everything around her into light-dazzled darkness. Not that she had been able to read anything from the expressions of these creatures when she had seen them.

“You shall return to your place before the dawn,” the Queen-thing told her, though again the words she heard in her head were not the sounds that came to her ears. “But that is no payment, and a price must be given.”

“Then give it to some other of the house who wishes it,” she said, terror making her brave or mad.

There was a silence, broken only by the shifting sounds of the hunt behind her and what she hoped was a breeze tossing the branches of the tree.

“Very well,” said the Queen-thing at last. “Take your poison with you, and return whence you came.”

The dirt roiled beneath her hand, pressing the little knife into her fingers before she could jerk them away. About her, the sparks circled again and then drew in, clustering not around her head and eyes but wrapping instead around her belly until she shone like a glow-worm. And then they sank through her clothes and skin and out of sight, filling her with a deep sense of dread, followed by darkness.

* * *

After all the nights of sleepless pacing and the child’s incessant kicking, the pain of birthing was nearly a relief, though the dread she tried her best to forget still lurked darkly in her belly in the breaths between the pain.

The child was a boy, big and red and squalling, and she felt as though she’d been hearing that cry without ears for all the time she’d spent sleepless and waiting for him. The midwife put him to her breast to suck, and he clamped down so hard with his little toothless gums that she gasped, but her eyes were

already beginning to memorize the shape of his head and the curve of his tiny brows. And then he turned his little human face up towards hers and opened grass-green eyes with odd oblong pupils at their centers.

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When not getting distracted by other people's books or the internet, Ann Chatham mostly makes things. (Worlds, wildlife gardens, clothing, dinner...) In real life she shares a small house near Baltimore with her husband, their cat, and his turtle. On the internet, something about her can be found at www.thanate.com.

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THE NATURE OF GHOSTS AND THE FATE OF SHADOWS

by Luke Nolby

A part of me wished to rise and attack them first, to dance across the darkened hill beneath the stars and steady wind of gray clouds. But that was a ghost part, and I needed my body beyond one more meaningless dance.

So I waited beside my small fire while they crept through the grass, shifting only when the wind whistled loudest, believing their rustles passed for its passing.

Seven my ghost counted; seven I cared not. Once, maybe, but no longer.

We cannot fault each other our natures, the shaman had said. The truth of his words had followed me since, a haunt closer than my very heart. But he was gone, his short-lived Karthian Rebellion over. ‘Rebellion’, for the Empire twisted the tale after it failed to stop the story from spreading. Plenty still saw the truth—or the one that suited them best. But the distinction was pointless; they all fought the same never-ending fight. It was the only one there was.

Then steel sat cold against the back of my neck, a star resting one menacing point, threatening the entire weight of its bright glory against my vertebrae. But I was motionless beneath the steel, and only watched the flames, their warmth failing to distract me from the endless snow within.

“Arms out to the side, slow-like,” the voice behind the steel grunted. A boy’s voice.

My old ghost said to feign obedience, then shift sideways and back, grab the arrogant wrist, fling its owner over, tuck my arms under his throat, and laugh while his boots burned in the flames.

I did not have enough fire for such a commitment to life, but neither did I lift my arms to the side.

Four more boys rose from the grass’s darkness, camouflaged like it, faces covered with scarves, blades dull. I gazed between their eyes, and none held mine.

“All right, then,” the voice behind me growled, frustrated. “Don’t move.”

The blade remained poised while another boy, carefully watching me watch him, leaned down slowly and then like a snake snatched my pack away. He crossed the fire and emptied it. Food, blanket, kindling: each item—as few items as there were—they scrutinized with pretend authority, though clearly they did not know what they were looking for.

“Weapon?” another one asked him.

He shook his head.

“Search him.”

I stood.

“I did not tell you to move!”

I began removing my clothes.

“You think this is some game, old man? I’ll cut you down right where-”

“Shut it, Duryne.”

The speaker—their leader—watched from across the fire. I went down to my skin. The wind explored me like it used to and I held my arms out wide, welcoming its chill. I added my sigh to its own, like old lovers staring up at the ceiling of a darkened cave, wishing we could have done better.

A boy stooped and examined me, not quite willing to search with anything but his eyes.

“No knife,” he said. “Not even a damn stick.”

They looked at me, the flames’ fingers flicking across their hidden faces. Those same finger-flames revealed me entirely, yet still the boy-leader asked it.

“Who are you?”

His question rolled in my head until there it transcended, shifted, out of his nervous voice and into the ambassador’s—confident, and demanding.

“Who are you?”

She had no eyes for this freshly dead man at my feet—my first ‘gift’ to the Empire—or even for my silver-etched blade yet wet with his blood. She stepped over the body like it was a lump of earth, a thing that only the feet were left aware of; she had more important matters to deal with above the mud.

She stopped before me and waited while her robes, garishly bright and unfeeling as lacquered flowers, swayed still. She knew I heard her question. She knew the answer. But I had to say it.

“I am a servant of the Empire.”

The ambassador brought her smooth, straight fingers together, and her lips pressed down into a stretching smile.

“Who are you?” Duryne repeated, and I blinked back into the windswept hill.

Who was I? Half a dozen words or names or titles entered my mind, but my bloodless heart said all were wrong, and I had no answer.

“He is someone... different,” the boy-leader said for us all.

In another life, maybe, I could have been his captain and would have cuffed him for such an assessment, simplified beyond usefulness. But in this case I did not think there was a more important distinction between them and me. Between everyone and me.

“I am Grent,” the boy-leader said.

I dressed and began returning my things to my pack, carefully and precisely.

“And you are crossing Vransia.”

Vransia. Yes, the name wrung it all together; names had that power. I remembered the dark eyes and thin hair, like dying grass, of these boys. I remembered the eager faces listening among Vransian Great Halls as the ambassador preached of prosperity and progress to be found in the Empire’s embrace while I stood behind, then only a member of the Third Elite Guard, and a group of idealist Vransian farmers with scythes and homemade pikes attacked our inn, and I cut the heads and limbs from four of them myself.

The men I killed could have been these boys’ grandfathers. Great Grent the Gardener; Papa Duryne the Stable-boy.

“Vransians are only farmers,” I said.

Even boy-leader Grent bristled at that. “Once, we may have been,” he said. “But the Empire took that from us.”

“And now you think to take it back, hopes resting upon boys in the night questioning old, unarmed travelers.”

They shifted, but Grent steadied them with some wiser person’s words. “Steel is but the weakest weapon in the Empire’s employ.”

“You are the first and last defense of the Empire,” the ambassador had confided in me. “Yet a defense only. Great in its moments, but therein lies the extent of your worth. Do not so readily over-value a sword.”

I had nodded, because she was right.

And I nodded now to the boys’ blades. “Yet you have taken it up easily enough.”

“The Empire forced us,” Duryne growled.

Grent shook his head at me. “Do you know what happens here, every day? Do you understand what has been taken?”

I held him in my gaze, frozen like I was inside: the blizzard, the march, the falling one by one, and the quiet covering of the snow behind. I heard the hammers in the forge-caves, the flutes over the wooded hills and the hunt-calls running with the plains-bears.

Denied your identity—the shaman’s words.

I sighed, and breathed again.

“Yes,” I finally answered.

Grent blinked.

The snow called.

“It is time I go,” I said.

“Go?” Duryne scoffed. “You were not given permission to come, and now you think to go?”

“Will you stop me?” I asked.

His head jerked with the apparent ridiculousness of the question. “We are five fighters to one unarmed old fool.”

“You are not five fighters,” I said, “but seven, and farmers.”

The boys stiffened in silence. After a moment, Grent nodded to the dark, and two bow-boys stepped into the firelight, shaking their heads in disbelief.

“Will you come with us?” Grent asked. “Our parents—our leaders—would be interested in speaking with you.”

“You ask like he has a choice.” Duryne’s hands wrung his sword’s hilt.

Vividly I saw that if I turned away he would rush me, and I would twist and take his sword, cut him down and then the others, adding their young lives to my past.

“Every moment has its choice,” I said.

And that moment lagged, until the boys shifted beneath the foresight of my truth.

Then I offered my pack to one and held my wrists together before me.

“I imagine you do not trust me to walk freely,” I said, “nor wish me to know the way.”

Grent nodded, a grateful gesture not of acknowledgement but of deflating relief.

I was bound, blindfolded, the fire was smothered, and they led me away. The wind blew. I shivered gratefully beneath its

cold, seeing the snow it carried waiting for me ahead and behind.

* * *

The last time I had volunteered to be captured, sixteen others were with me. When we surrendered to the Empire's Men, still my soul sought to scream; they had no right, no ability, and smugly tied my bonds, thinking me bested. My enraged heart slammed against my ribs, seeking release, but for my chieftain and my people, I contained it. I learned to hide the humiliation of being bound within the anticipation of seeing our trap sprung. Even so, I was always grateful for the blindfolds; I could feign submission if required and did not have to act for anger, but I knew the lie of our ploy sat too earnestly within my eyes.

The Empire's Men had covered my lying eyes that last time, too, and I was sure my blade would soon bathe in their blood.

They led us stumbling through the forest. Though every root and rock our feet alone could have traversed safely, we humbled our pride and stumbled, because the Empire's Men would not have believed otherwise.

And while we stumbled, Adhai soared far overhead, her screech nearly imaginable above the unseen canopy, almost drowned beneath the grunting, cursing, scuffling of tied feet;

but we each heard it. And our chieftain followed Adhai, for Adhai followed me.

Late into the night, the Empire's Men marched us. When they finally forced us to sit, I smelled the late lilacs, heard the distant hidden fall, and knew the wood we were in.

Now we would wait, and when the grayest light of predawn bled into itself, when the Empire's Men had succumbed to sleep or were so drained with a night-long vigil that they were regardless weakened, our people would come. Two would creep in first like night-newts, cut our bonds, return our blades, and while the Empire's Men woke and raised alarms to our people charging from the front, calling their counterattacks against the forest or plains or cliffs or rivers or wherever in our sacred land they thought themselves safe, we the freed prisoners would come from behind.

Each time it happened that way.

But that night, as the Empire's Men drank merrily by their fires, laughing loudly—singing, even—the scorn of doubt wrung my numbed wrists.

"They do not act like Empire's Men," my nearest companion breathed. "They are unconcerned."

I cocked my head, listening hard up into the night, searching for Adhai's courageous cry.

A body plopped down beside me, drunken voice attached. “Hey, lookit this one!” it called back to the fires. “Listenin’ for the damned hawk, are ya?”

I froze. He shifted as if reaching behind, and I sensed a form held up before my blindfolded face.

Adhai’s form.

I clenched, and an uncontrollable gasp escaped my lips. The Empire’s Man laughed. My fist closed around a clump of dirt, and his fist crunched across my cheek. My companions stiffened.

“I’ll tell ya somethin’.” The voice oozed closer. “A secret. Ya bastard barbarians ain’t the only ones with ‘em.”

The stench of his sweat and liquor and leather was smothering.

“Ain’t that right, men? Secrets, that is! We got our own secrets!”

The Empire’s Men laughed.

“Ya think we don’t know ya tricks? Ya still think ya chieftain’s comin’ to save ya? Well, I think it’s ya chieftain who needs the savin’. That ravine we passed through, that’s no place to get surrounded in. No, we won’t be worryin’ about him, not any of ya barbarian bastards—not ever again!”

I was young, full of hate, and my heart could not contain the maddening beat anymore. When my rage erupted in

screams and I thrashed against my bonds, letting the anger ignite my limbs, send spittle from my lips and curses from my heart, my experienced companions hissed at me to be silent. When my foot found the face of the Empire's Man holding Adhai, when the Empire's Men began to beat me, maybe my companions called, "Not now, young one!" or, "Patience!" but all I heard was Adhai's silence, my people's screams echoing across sharp-sided stones, and the Empire's Men using my rage to beat us all into unconsciousness.

* * *

The Vransian boys took me east along the hill's crest. I heard their steps, smelled their sweat. One ran ahead, presumably to inform whoever it was we were going to meet.

When we left the hilltops, the breeze became light with the scent of grazed grasses. The air warmed, and my boots hit the hard-packed earth of a well-worn path.

I sensed the building before we entered it. A door swung open, relieving its warm dried-grass must into my nostrils before I was ushered in. The door was closed quickly behind.

I sensed I was surrounded.

"I apologize, but the blindfold must remain," an older but polite voice informed. "A precaution to our identities."

My ghost would have laughed, but I was not capable of such derision.

I was forced to sit.

“Tell us,” the voice began, “how does an old, simple man, too dark-haired and dark-skinned to be birthed anywhere but far from here, come to be travelling alone through our land?”

“It is not your land.”

Angry mutters.

“This is Vransia,” the voice retorted.

“Part of the Empire,” I stated.

Louder anger.

“All right, all right.” I imagined the voice holding its hands up. “For now, maybe. But you have not answered our question.”

“Is it yours to ask?” *And, I thought, is it mine to answer?*

“This is Vransia, senile fool,” someone exclaimed. “Our land, our home, and you will tell us your business!”

I sighed. No, they did not deserve derision. Nothing did anymore. We were all the same. Separated across unsailable seas, isolated within impassable peaks; fighters, farmers, emperors, ambassadors: people would ever be the same.

“Maybe it is best the Empire holds sway now.” That last slipped from my lips, and I earned shouts that took a full minute to quiet.

“You show little fear for your situation, old one,” the voice observed.

I considered that a moment. “I believe I have passed such in my life.”

Someone scoffed. “You think yourself above fear?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I feel much beneath it.”

They did not know how to respond to that, and I did not help them. They would not understand, people like these... people. One task remained to me. The mountains called to my bones; their ice was in my breath. The shaman had woken me again, and the snow was waiting.

“He’s a gods-blasted spy!” a boy asserted. Others agreed.

“And you were kind enough to bring him here,” the voice said, cutting them off.

I felt their eyes.

“Will you not tell us who you are?” the voice asked. “Your intentions here?”

It seemed a final offer of sorts. A shiver closed in around me, and I welcomed its embrace. “I am but a shadow, waiting to rejoin the dark.”

They muttered amongst themselves. A new voice, hoarse in some unknown apprehension, carried to my ear.

“I would see his eyes, Jansen. There is something in the way he holds himself...”

My blindfold was torn away, and I blinked against the oily glare of lightly lidded lanterns. I was indeed inside a giant

barn, bales of hay and sacks of grain stretching up and back into darkness. Gathered around me were two dozen men and women, some young like the boys who had brought me, others older, and older still.

And the oldest, his face bloodless as a dried leech, stared at me, while the rest stared at him.

“Franstet, what is it?” they asked worriedly.

Old Franstet found his voice right as I noticed his missing arm, hewn cleanly at the shoulder.

“I know you,” he said, the words crumpling him resignedly.

I felt no pity, but neither did the anger that had sent me racing north from that Karthian massacre, nor did the self-hatred at all the Spirits I had stolen come back to me, facing this man now, a past victim of mine.

A single drop of blood upon my bones.

He raised his remaining arm and pointed, shaking beneath the weight of his unchosen fate, for he did not understand that it was only by our choice that the world ever happened to us.

“Here,” he condemned, “is an Empire’s Man.”

And I sighed, because once, he had been right.

* * *

The ambassador had said so as well, but fondly, grinning as I helped her from the rubble of her inn-bed and the mess of

Vransian bodies, the rest of those farmers fleeing their failed assassination with what limbs and lives they had left.

“Through and through—” her eyes shone like the pale moon— “you prove yourself. Here is a true Empire’s Man. And now—” she tore the badge from the dying soldier against the wall and pressed it into my hand—“an Empire’s *captain*.”

I stoically dipped my head, believing myself immune to her praise. I was working my way through their ranks just as planned, earning their trust until my vengeance would be meted out.

The Summer Slaughter, the Vransians came to call it. I remembered now. A few murderous men killed, and the people turned the tale to heroic martyrs.

My ghost called it self-defense, and it had been, but now in this barn full of rage, I said nothing.

They threw me to my feet, punching, pushing, smacking, and as they screamed for my blood I imagined how they once were, tilling their fields, pausing beneath a breath of wind or thanking a passing cloud for its shield against the sun, returning home for food and family.

But the Empire had not done this to them; they had done it to themselves.

The blizzard wailed in my heart.

They slammed me up against a timber; new ropes tied me to it. My rough-hide shirt was torn away and they paused, for the lantern light was more honest than hilltop flames and clearly revealed the scars already adorning me. I felt their shameless stares across my miss-colored stripes and spots, their eyes searching for meaning in this artist's palimpsest canvas.

But only I understood that the artist would ever be unfinished, and unsatisfied.

The pause ended as humanity won out, and their shouts and threats and promises pounced anew, full of hatred and pain and loss for a world that I had once been as willing a part of as they.

The whip struck, hot enough to burn me back to the first lash decades past, to that forest where I awoke to its fire with a scream and found myself tied to a tree, torches tickling my feet. The Empire's Men laughed and struck again, and I screamed like a skewered boar, and then in rage for screaming at all. My head drooped, and I saw my companions watching in steady silence, faces bloodied and bruised.

I had done that to them.

The third time the lash had fallen I only grunted, and thereafter made no sound at all. I held my companions' gazes because I owed them at least that. I held their gazes because

then I would not think of a blood-reddened ravine, or Adhai's silence, or the hope and pride being flayed from my flesh.

In the barn, the whip descended again, and the musty air clogged in my throat.

Another lash, another time and place, but halted in its onslaught by the voice that would come to rule me.

"Stop!" she commanded. I blinked against the sun that glared off the polished stone wall I faced. Rarely had the ambassador shown how capable of rage she was, but I had heard it then. "What is this?!"

"Ambassador, he is a savage, and it is the Empire's way to convert—"

"No, it is your way, you brainless ass! Leave me with him."

"Ambassador, this man is unnaturalized—dangerous!"

"If he is, what does that make me?" she snapped.

I was silent. The sun baked my opened back and coaxed the filth at my feet to awaken its stench to the bright morning. My blood trickled to my worn woolen prisoner pants, and I listened to the approaching steps—light, but confident beyond measure.

I was unchained from the whipping ring but never slumped. A woman imagining herself my savior faced me, though if she had looked past her nose she would have seen that I needed no saving, and was not savable.

Already, even then, I was not, though I did not know.

“The Empire does not treat our brave volunteers so.” She sighed apologetically, shaking her head. “These fools do not understand who you are. They do not know from what you have come.”

Neither did she, but I cared not to say.

“Forgive me; I have misplaced my manners! I am Tanla, Ambassador of the Empire.”

She waited for my name, but I had many. I was known by the peal of silver hammers in the forge-caves; by the roaring plains-bears and the hunt-horn’s chase; by the steady sky upon ancient trees and seas of grass. My name was noble steeds’, countless children’s, women’s, men’s. My name was fire and earth, blood and bone: the silence of a people, and I had not given it, then or ever again, for no one understood who I was, and only I knew from what I had come.

Through my silence, her smile never wavered. “Come. Let me show you the wonders you will earn.”

She had shown, and how eagerly I had earned it all.

* * *

“Stop, *stop!*”

The voice was not a Vransian voice, and it more than the quitting of the whip brought me back to the barn, that point in time my body existed most fully in.

“Who gave you the right?” this voice—a woman’s voice—demanded of the farmers.

“He is an Empire’s Man, crossing our lands in secret—an Elite Guardsman, part of the Summer Slaughter!”

“He cut the very arm from Franstet’s shoulder!”

“Move,” the woman commanded.

She approached, and the hot grease of a lantern’s light lit upon my face and hers.

Her Karthian face.

I saw her again in that city square, marching with her fellow guards at my request to reluctantly ask their spiritual leaders to leave, but of course, the shamans would not.

“I know those eyes,” she said in disbelief. “Raw as iron, full of too much pride to bend beneath the whip.”

It was not pride that held me up; nothing so complex was left to me.

“You sound as a lover scorned,” a Vransian muttered.

“Or have seen a geist,” added another, warily.

“Both, perhaps, beneath the awe,” she answered, her gaze unwavering from mine. “For he is a Dumrikhat. *The* Dumrikhat.”

* * *

When the shaman had observed such, in that crowded Karthian square, it had shaken me completely. I was Captain of

the Fourth Elite Guard, veiled in Empire's armor, disguised behind decades of denial. Yet his eyes were truth, and I saw the ice they proclaimed, the past I had forgotten at what I before believed were the machinations of the Empire but had come to understand as my own.

"I only wish to keep peace, Shaman," I told him quietly, eyeing the crowd.

And with utter simplicity, he said it. "Yet you are Dumrikhat."

I staggered as if struck, never believing a single word could have such force. But that forgotten facet of my being lived in his gaze where, walking again after so many years, was the line of people in the snow.

His mouth tightened at my reaction. "Does your masters' corrupting control run so deep? Has your very identity been denied?"

The line staggered on, became a hundred, twenty, ten. Like a stone long lost to the depths, a violent anger resurfaced in me, emotion so long subdued it felt invasive.

The ambassador's gaze settled on me from where she spoke atop the stage, and I found words for the shaman, but words so inundated with the voices of others and bereft of meaning that even then I tasted their bile: "The mention of that obliterated race is forbidden by the Empire, and you dare—"

“Yes, I dare.” His eyes, those great eyes, filled as they were with truth as obvious as the shining sun while for so long I had pretended there was no light, held me with incredulity, and disgust. “I dare where men like you fail to even *remember*.”

And despite the truth, I responded exactly as the Empire had wished, with the sliding of six inches of steel from scabbard. That well-oiled silence was menacing enough to halt him, widen the eyes of nearby Karthians and drown out even a resurrected blizzard’s wail.

“Leave this square,” I told him. “I do not wish any death.”

His face shifted then. I did not see it at the time—did not wish to see it—but looking back, I knew what it was.

Regret.

“No, Dumrikhat,” he said. “You were born for it, as was I. Yet we cannot fault each other our natures.”

I wanted to ask what we can fault, but I did not, and as he walked away I realized that I already knew.

* * *

“Dumrikhat?” the Vransians whispered. Even here in the dead night and darkened barn, in this single crop-country among dozens feeding the Empire, they were afraid to say it too loudly. “How is it possible? They were—”

“Yes,” the Karthian woman interrupted. “But he was not.”

She cut me free. The Vransians looked at me anew, warily.

“How do you know him, Diel?” the Vransian leader, Jansen, asked.

“He was there, at the start of the resistance, when our shamans performed their final miracle...”

The behemoth, boulder-body, tree-trunk limbs, bear paws that could hold a horse, serpentine tendrils writhing from its back, thirty feet tall, had charged our double pike wall, shattered itself upon the Empire’s Fourth Elite Guard, stomping, tearing, rending. We did the same back, each thrust and slash cutting bits from it, bits that returned to the individual shamans who had created the creature, and we killed them and they killed us until the first moment I had breathed again.

Of all my men, only Falnio and Weslavn yet stood with me, facing the behemoth that had been all but reduced to rubble, its few remaining shamans flickering in and out of form as they fought for their dying spell. And its eyes held me steadily.

The ice-eyes of my shaman.

But Falnio swore its eyes were the burning black of butchered pasture and endless funeral pyres, and Weslavn vowed they were the pale rot of poisoned fish and drowned corpses, littering the beach so thoroughly they replaced the sand between land and sea.

I only saw ice.

With roars Falnio and Weslavn charged, and the behemoth's claws descended one final time. They screamed, I breathed it in, and in their agonized death throes they plunged their blades thankfully into that massive thing. Then with utter serenity that invoked my bitter envy, they embraced the bliss of ending.

Only I remained, and my ice-eyed shaman naked and kneeling in the mud.

"You have no hope," I said to him. "Do you not see?"

I heard the plea in my voice and realized it had come too late—decades too late, for me.

"Clearly," he answered softly, "we did."

I looked around at the dead—not my men, for I understood then that they were not my men, and had never been. Like me, maybe, but not mine.

I looked at the shamans.

Then the ambassador appeared beside me, looking down upon the bodies with amusement. "How much the Empire owes to *you*, Captain..."

"He obliterated your very faith!" the Vransians yelled at Diel.

"Yes," she acknowledged. "He severed our spirit-lines. But I watched as he also turned his back on Venom-Tongue Tanla

herself, and I watched as she ran him through with his own sword.”

“Fool!” the ambassador spat at me, pulling my blade free and shoving me to the mud. “Did you think I could let you—would let you!—walk away? You *belong* to the Empire!”

She kicked my face. I sprawled.

“Pathetic,” she snorted. “Slaughterer of Soldiers, Survivor of the Ice, last of the fabled Dumrikhat, and I, less strength than a maid, able to stab you in the back with your own sword!”

Suddenly, against the rending freeze in my gut, I grinned. I grinned, and I laughed for the first time in decades, and the last time ever.

“We cannot fault each other,” I whispered, “our natures, Ambassador.”

“I watched,” Diel continued, “as despite that mortal wound, he found his feet, and walked away. The mob closed in on cowering Venom-Tongue Tanla, and she called after him for help, promising riches and forgiveness. But he kept walking.” Diel lifted her chin to me. “We saw clearly that day what the Empire would bring to our country. Because of your defiance, Dumrikhat.”

I did not tell her my actions were not born of defiance. They were not born of hate for the Empire or for the

ambassador. I did not tell her that from the moment I had looked into the shaman's eyes, only one thing had mattered.

"What happened to him after?" Grent asked.

Diel shook her head. "We searched for him, but found nothing. We were sure he had died."

And I had, crossing that frozen lake a lifetime ago.

The barn fell into uneasy silence, everyone present pondering these revelations of my person. Everyone except me, for my thoughts turned ever toward the snow.

Jansen cleared his throat. "Even if you speak truly, Diel, he has too many wrongs to avoid judgment. He has done too much for the Empire."

"And what would you have of him?" she asked skeptically. "He has already been flogged without my leave."

"An arm, at the very least!" someone called, and others agreed, clapping old Franstet.

"An arm for an arm," I intoned.

They nodded. "It's fair."

"And that is what you want," I said. "Fairness."

"Justice!" they cried. "It's what we *deserve*."

"From the Empire."

"And if your fairness is followed," I asked, "what will you lose?"

They blinked, and I did not, for there was a 'they'.

And then that they shifted, argued, yelled, and were lost.

“We seek justice upon you, who have wronged us,” Jansen called over them. “What do you say to this, Dumrikhat?”

They quieted, watching me.

“There is no justice,” I said. “Only people.”

And the people said nothing.

Diel the Karthian stepped forward. “Then I say this.”

She drew a blade, a blade I had not thought to see again. Its silver etchings shined coldly, pushing the Vransians back to the greasy heat of the lanterns, while its hilt, forged in the likeness of a plains-bear—no, a *Khatri*, for that was their name—roared silently at them all.

Diel held it out to me, roaring carved Khatri-hilt first.

“Take back your blade, Dumrikhat.”

My blade, my people’s history and blood. My blade, gleaming, the Spirits that strengthened its steel calling to me.

“Take up your beautiful sword, my friend,” the ambassador said, presenting it to me again after that final test. The dust had not settled across the arena, and the blood of the other ‘brave volunteers’ yet pooled at my feet. “And welcome to your wonderful new life.”

“You arm our captive!” Jansen roared hysterically at Diel. Weapons bared, frantic teeth. “An Empire’s Man—a Dumrikhat—and you *arm* him!”

The Vransians shouted, and I ignored them, for they were yipping hound pups against the claws of a Khatri; my blade was in my hand.

“He could have taken it himself,” Diel snapped back, “and at our loss! Lower your weapons, fools!”

She stepped into my face.

“Only people, you say—” her voice began to tremble with fervor— “but when the few fight to oppress, the many must resist. We resist! Stalking the streets of Halis, prowling the ports of Sharonad—even here in Vransian barns, we resist. But we are scattered! I and other Karthian survivors have tried to unite them, but failed. And then out of a ghostly night walks you, Dumrikhat. You, Captain of an Elite Guard, trained in Empire’s ways and politics... you, a *Dumrikhat*, living to deny the Empire its greatest genocide! So many wait for a chance to fight back, and with you they will flock to our cause!”

Vransian faces flickered between fearful distrust and fanatic possibility at this unimagined hope appearing in their barn.

“Fate brings you here, to end the Empire!”

The Spirits within my steel whispered around my hands, into my blood: glorified death-cries, roars of marvelous beasts... and the voices of an entire people that had yet to find rest.

“To end the Empire...” my ghost dreamed.

We cannot fault each other our natures; we cannot fault ourselves.

“Join us, Dumrikhat,” Diel called. “Join us in our war for peace!”

I looked up at her and paused, seeing a different face.

“You will belong to a mighty company of warriors,” the ambassador told me, marching through a crowded market of smiling, wine-sipping citizens beneath bright canopies and a brighter sun. The citizens dipped their heads at our passing, thanking us. “Warriors from across the Empire, forming my personal Elite Guard. We will see the world, and you will be the Empire’s shining beacon of everlasting peace. For that is the ultimate goal: peace.”

The citizens sipped more, the markets’ canopies grew brighter, and the shadows they threw lengthened.

“We bring the light of civilization,” the ambassador proclaimed in the market.

“The lies of their *prosperity* and *progress!*” Diel’s curse rang flatly through the barn.

“They will see our ways,” someone promised, “and lament their wrongs.”

“Imagine a new beginning!” sang another.

“End suffering!”

“Spread joy!”

“Fight for freedom!”

“Fight for fairness!”

“Fight for us!”

“Fight!”

“Fight!”

“Fight!”

Their shadows of peace covered the world, darkening the battlefields where bled ever more people. In Empire’s armor and not, all eyes were closed in equal measure of forever. After each victory, I lay down with them, too, and closed my eyes. But each time, I opened them again, rose, and carried on for the Empire.

“You will do great things for us,” the ambassador whispered in my ear, lovingly. “For the Empire.”

And for the Empire I had cowed and captured and killed people after people, shifting my Spirit-whispers to cries of terror as I danced those shadowed bleeding-grounds to the tune of my vengeance to come. The Empire had pointed me to the sun, and I had pretended that once I reached it I would use it against them. But as I stared at their sun, cutting away their enemies between me and it, I cut myself away, too—first fingers, toes, then hands, feet, limbs—until I cared not to even

reach, for I had nothing to reach with; I was left only my blade to bear witness to what I had done.

Not ‘they’, but what *I* had done.

And the shaman, ice-eyes reflections of truth, had shown me that.

My blade fell to the barn floor, like it had before in that mud-churned square with the bodies of self-corrupted Elite Guardsmen stolen from so many proud, defeated peoples, and the bodies of the newly conquered Karthian shamans.

I turned away from the Vransian farmers, from Diel the Karthian, and from their world’s never-ending fight.

“You would leave us?” Jansen sputtered. “You condemn our fates!”

“How can you turn away?” Diel’s dumbfounded voice called. “This is our moment!”

They cried out for answers, all of them, old and young, and they did not learn, and would never know.

“Do you remember what they did to your people, Dumrikhat?”

The last was young Grent. I stopped. I could have said many things to that. I could have told him he had no right to judge me, had no idea what I did and did not remember. I could have told him the Empire’s claws work their way into you until no, you do *not* remember. I could have told him that yes, I

remembered, and I also remembered the Hushlen tribes, the Boigvuk clans; the Yorntish and Therises; Weslavn's people of the coast; Falnio's shepherds of the sun-dappled riverlands; the Karthians in their own city square.

I could have said nothing and instead taken up my blade and cut them all down, just as the Empire would have done, just as I had always done.

"All I remember," I said finally, "is that we did it to ourselves."

I hoisted my pack and left. I do not think they parted before me, but I shifted through them regardless, the shadow of a ghost.

* * *

Despite the drunken Empire's Men's surety, the ravine had allowed survivors, and those pitifully few had found and freed us. Through swollen eyes I watched a narrow view of the Empire's Men as we tied them to trees to be whipped, beaten, and pissed upon before we finally slit their throats.

When I returned to our sacred forge-caves, I found our chieftain with half his heart past the gates of death.

"We are fire and earth," he said. "Blood and bone. We are forever victorious."

I nodded. "Man, woman, child—we fight to the death. We are Dumrikhat."

“No.” His voice fluttered as he gripped my face. “Our pride is less than our people. Our people must live, for we are fire and earth, blood and bone. To the Great Mountains,” he told me. “Lead them. Take our people away from this end.”

“They are impassable,” I argued, angry. “Haunted by Chaos, by never-ending ice.”

“Yes,” he told me, “and our people are Dumrikhat.”

From his lips the name meant something, stirred my spirit deep. It was all I needed to hear.

But names, first among words, were first among lies, and that one most of all.

The Empire hounded us, yet we remained ahead. Whenever I looked over my shoulder I would stare for a timeless moment, because in each gaze I saw the glint of endless marching pikes; the curling of black smoke greasing the horizon above our burning halls; the faces of Empire’s Men butchering, raping, laughing.

I never saw us setting them staked in front of starved Khatri; dragging them naked and tied to our saddles; bouncing their heads upon our galloping war parties’ spears. I never saw that we were all the same, and ever would be.

And after staring but not seeing, I would turn back and urge my people along because the Empire was right behind, but

I could not stop to face them; my people were full of tears, but I would not let them fall.

I retraced that path, reliving it.

Trees died, then grasses. The land grew high and stony. Our steeds, our proud sure-footed friends, slipped, broke legs, screamed in pain and fear when our regretful blades descended. It chilled us to pack the meat upon the shoulders of the survivors, but we needed the food. We traded our last valuables to the final fur-villages and mountain-men, traded until we had nothing left except our Dumrikhat blades, our souls.

I woke one night to a sting upon my nose; the snow had left my memory to fill the sky, silent as the mountain I climbed.

And so I rose and went forward into the cold.

Dead-sun days, silent wind-blasted nights; I was unaware of the passing of either. Neither did I remember my exodus from the soul-stealing mountains. I held onto a desire only: to search back, to check for stragglers, for surely there were others. I was certain they had not left me; I was certain I had not left them.

There was a hut, a face with a fire, but I was gone again, searching.

Many moons passed outside of memory, but pass they did, and I found myself in the old woods, crossing our sacred plains.

The Khatri were gone. There were buildings, towns of straight-cut stone and timber. I stumbled into their dream.

When the people came out to look, I could only shake my head; theirs were not faces I knew. Where were my people? I had gone into the mountains with them; they had followed me into the ice, the cold. Where were they now?

Dumrikhat, Dumrikhat, the strange faces whispered around me, and the Empire's Men had come and I gave myself and my blade and my denial into their dream, gave the faded echoes of hammers in the forge-caves, the wind's memory of roaring Khatri on moonlit hunts, the Spring Sun's laughter above singing children. Then all I had left was the cold and snow.

Until, inevitably, I even gave them that, but the shaman gave it back.

I stopped, suddenly lost in the midst of the frozen lake.

The wind pushed the drifts off into infinite white, baring ice like shattered steel and covering it again in belying softness. There was nothing else. *Dumrikhat*, came the call. Its syllables were not the rallying horns of warriors or rend of silvered steel through armor; it was winter's wail, unthawing silence, the name of my people.

I breathed.

As I walked my last walk, I did not feel the cold; instead I felt the gaze of our steeds, the Khatri, of soaring Adhai, of my people, my chieftain—and the shaman, my briefest but greatest friend.

“Our power was once great,” he said, kneeling and naked before me, bodies of his brethren and Empire’s Men scattered through that Karthian mud pit. Shame collected in his face. “And look now.”

When I came across the first forgotten forms, frozen in the eternity of their unending march, I lost my breath to the wind.

“But now we return,” he continued, “to the earth, the water, the sky...”

My people, found again at last. As I passed them, one by one, they stared at me. Stooped as I was, salted ice scratching from my eyes, I did not avert my gaze; I owed them that.

“We wished once more to live,” the shaman said, and looked up. I did not know then if he included me in his ‘we’, but I knew now. “And we are the last.”

They stretched on, the snow covering and then revealing, until like ghosts they danced around this shadow’s staggered march. The wind and ice pulled my furs away from my scarred skin, baring it to the white, and I knew I was old, older than I ever should have been.

I told the shaman nothing for a time, searching those eyes for the line of people I had seen there struggling through the snow. All that showed now was me, reflected, alone.

The shaman smiled up at me, a smile that said in different lives we would have been lovers, or brothers, and I brought my blade—my Dumrikhat blade—down through his heart.

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“The Nature of Ghosts and the Fate of Shadows” is Luke Nolby’s first fantasy publication. He is currently working on a novel set in the same world but in a different place and a very different time. He studied ecology, which he has primarily used to go fishing and to travel rugged parts of East Africa gaining inspiration for stories—and doing handstands. A hyena once kissed him.

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COVER ART

“High Above the Savannah,” by Martin Ende



*Martin Ende is a self-taught artist from Germany who began in pencil drawings and moved to digital mediums in 2011. He worked as a concept artist in small game projects such as *Liberico* from *Enraged Entertainment*, as well as doing illustrations for some tank restoration projects. View more of his art at maddendd.deviantart.com and www.mad-and-nice.de.*

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